

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Issue Fact Sheet

The Issue: Management of Closed Areas

Background: Portions of the refuge designated as closed areas are actually areas closed only to hunting and furbearer trapping during the duck hunting season and to migratory bird hunting at all times. They are generally open for other uses, including recreational boating and sport and commercial fishing. The only exceptions are the Spring Lake Closed Area (Pool 13) which is a sanctuary and closed to all public entry during the duck hunting season, and the Goose Island No Hunting Zone (Pool 8) which is closed to hunting at all times.

The core of the current refuge closed area system was established in 1957-58 after nearly 10 years of coordination. The system began with 14 closed areas, including Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), and encompassed about 41,600 acres. Considering the dominant role of the refuge in the Mississippi Flyway migration corridor, the closed area system was established to provide migrating waterfowl with a network of feeding and resting areas, and to disperse waterfowl hunting opportunities on the refuge. These goals were initially met.

After nearly 45 years, changes have occurred in the closed area system, including the amount and quality of habitat available, the number and species of waterfowl using the system, and the size and number of closed areas. Fewer islands and acres of plants are generally available to provide shelter, food, and cover. The number of migratory waterfowl using the system has also changed. More diving ducks, tundra swans, and Canada geese are now present, but fewer puddle ducks. Boundary adjustments have been made which have reduced the size of many closed areas. An exception is the Trempealeau NWR which has increased from about 700 acres in 1957 to nearly 6,200 acres today. One new closed area, the Pool Slough Closed Area, will become operational on Pool 9 in 2003. About 900 acres of this 1,350-acre closed area are located on the refuge. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources owns the remaining 450 acres and has designated the site a waterfowl refuge and closed to all trespass from 15 September through 25 December, then open to hunting and trapping. In recent years, seven "No Hunting Zones" were established (6 on Pool 13 and 1 on Pool 7), totaling nearly 715 acres, for public safety, to reduce potential user group conflicts, and provide opportunities for wildlife observation. Not all of these acres are considered waterfowl habitat.

The impact of human-caused disturbance to waterfowl concentrated in closed areas is also being reviewed. Human disturbance disrupts feeding activities of waterfowl and potentially could reduce the quality of staging sites. To waterfowl, the energy cost of disturbance may be appreciable in terms of disruption of feeding, displacement from preferred habitat, and the added energy expended to avoid disturbance. The only tool currently being used by the refuge to address human-caused disturbance during fall migration is the Lake Onalaska Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Area (Pool 7). This program has been operational each year from 15 October through mid-November since 1986.

The closed area system was designed to disperse waterfowl hunting opportunity. Hunters tend to congregate near concentrations of waterfowl. As a result, "firing lines" have developed along some sections of closed area boundaries. At times, these firing lines can be crowded reducing the quality of the hunting experience.

(Over)

Main Concerns:

1. Just as the river's character has changed, so has the amount and quality of waterfowl habitat found in closed areas. As a result, not all closed areas in the system are providing waterfowl with the habitat components required to meet their biological needs. Waterfowl are now concentrated in a few functioning closed areas rather than being dispersed throughout the system.
2. A significant percentage of the continental canvasback population concentrates annually in closed areas located on Pools 7-9. The availability and quality of habitat located on former off-river staging areas have contributed to this increased use, but so has the decline in habitat within the closed area system, such as the Weaver Bottoms Closed Area (Pool 5).
3. Fewer puddle ducks are using closed areas now compared to the early years of the system.
4. Habitat projects aimed at restoring fishery habitat within closed areas may result in more human use, which could lead to increased disturbance to waterfowl concentrated during fall migration.
5. At times, waterfowl hunters concentrate along sections of closed area boundary. The quality of the hunting experience may be lessened in areas where this occurs as waterfowlers compete for prime locations. Other characteristics of firing lines include crowding and excessive "skybusting," which can result in an increase in the number of un-retrieved birds.